IMAGINATION
IN THE AGE OF REASON

The Enlightenment period in Europe (about 1685–1815), long celebrated as "the age of reason," adopted a revolutionary emphasis on individual liberty, direct observation, and rational thought. Enlightenment society prized learning and innovation, producing an unprecedented flowering of knowledge with major advances in fields as diverse as art, philosophy, politics, and science. Important thinkers of the time questioned long-held beliefs, instead using scientific reasoning to uncover new principles on which to base a modern society. Yet the Enlightenment ideals of truth and knowledge could also at times be used to promote subjective values and biases about marginalized peoples and their experiences.

During this same period, imagination became a hotly debated topic in Enlightenment circles. While some saw it as necessary to truth and innovation, others believed it was a dangerous temptation capable of leading to immorality and vice. Artists in particular reveled in the power of the imagination to expose hidden principles, conjure strange worlds, or concoct illusions. François Boucher and Francisco de Goya, among others, drew on imagination to envision far-off places and people, attract new buyers for their art, and comment on society, and its beliefs. They blurred the boundaries of fact and fantasy, often without distinguishing between the two. Imagination was a dynamic tool through which Enlightenment-era artists marketed their work revealed or obscured truth, entertained or educated viewers, and supported or criticized systems of power.

Pulled from the CMA's rich holdings of European prints and drawings from the 1700s and early 1800s, this exhibition explores the Enlightenment's complex relationship between imagination, truth, and knowledge.

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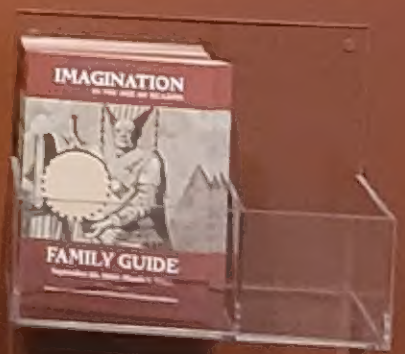

***The Alchymist, in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, Discovers Phosphorus,* 1775**
Mezzotint

William Pether
(British, about 1730–1821)
After Joseph Wright of Derby
(British, 1734–1797)

The print's title and the medieval-looking interior filled with instruments identify the kneeling figure as an alchemist, someone who seeks the philosopher's stone, a mythic substance that was thought to transform ordinary metals into gold and reverse the aging process. Here, the alchemist's experiments accidentally lead him to discover the chemical element phosphorus, seen glowing in the flask before him. In choosing this moment of illumination, the artist crafted a potent allegory of the Enlightenment, in which the creative force of imagination becomes true knowledge through reason and observation.

Adam and Robert H. Hilton Fund [1995.1]

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Alma and Robert D. Milne Fund 1995.2

Folly and Social Critique

For artists in the 1700s, imagination was a powerful tool used to make sense of human nature in all its complexity. Harnessing its power, they produced inventive compositions that commented on society, questioned or endorsed the status quo, or ridiculed the folly of humankind. While some expressed their views through the fantastical or the absurd, others infused fictional narratives with exaggerated comedy or cynicism. Laden with Enlightenment cultural references or steeped in ambiguity, the complex layers of meaning in these works sometimes reveal their hidden depths only with close study and sustained attention—or are lost on us as modern viewers.

A Young Woman Buying a Pink from a Young Man, about 1740
Black crayon (wetted and rubbed) and white chalk on faded blue paper

Giovanni Battista Piazzetta
(Italian, 1682–1754)

In his large finished drawings of character types, Giovanni Battista Piazzetta often placed his carefully observed figures in ambiguous social interactions, leaving the viewer to puzzle out or imagine the nature of their relationship. Here, a well-dressed young woman gently plucks a flower from a bouquet of pinks. The bloom, popularly associated with love in the 1700s, connects her to the flower seller before her. Other details, such as the man's direct gaze or the woman's hand clasped tenderly to her chest, suggest a possible attraction. Is this an innocent sales transaction or the blossoming of forbidden love?

Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1939.287

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Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1938.387

Capriccios

Immensely popular during the Enlightenment, architectural fantasies known as capriccios, or caprices, blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. Often combining real places or buildings with whimsical or fantastical elements, capriccios allowed Enlightenment artists to exercise their creative faculties, generating a wide range of inventive compositions for their own pleasure or to entice collectors. Many of these artists drew on their training as architects or stage designers, infusing their work with monumentality and drama. They exaggerated scale, played with perspective, rearranged or moved real sites, and devised fanciful details and motifs. Artists also experimented with the expressive possibilities of different printmaking techniques and drawing media, employing them to evoke specific moods or to describe stone, imitate water, and capture light.

Prisoners on a Projecting Platform, from *Imaginary Prisons*, 1749–50
Etching, engraving, and sulphur tint or open-bite, with burnishing

Giovanni Battista Piranesi
(Italian, 1720–1778)

In his series of imaginary prisons, Giovanni Battista Piranesi experimented with scale, perspective, and etching to create disorienting and disturbing images of incarceration. Based on his training as a stage designer rather than on observations of real prisons, Piranesi used a low vantage point and distant staircases to disrupt traditional perspective and to emphasize both the monumentality of the space and the futility of trying to escape. Set against a strange cloud of white smoke, the densely drawn and deeply etched lines of the prisoners at left produce a confusing jumble of bodies that, while imprecise, evoke their pain and punishment.

Dudley P. Allen Fund 1941.26.8

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***The Temple of Isis at Pompeii*, 1788**
Hand-colored etching

Francesco Piranesi
(Italian, 1758–1810)
Louis Jean Desprez
(French, 1743–1804)

Buried under layers of volcanic ash since the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, the ancient Roman sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii were rediscovered and excavated in the 1700s. Remarkably well preserved, the two cities captured the imagination of Enlightenment Europe. Artists Francesco Piranesi and Louis Jean Desprez capitalized on the popularity of the ancient sites, creating an innovative souvenir of Pompeii. Etched by Piranesi, the prints were based on Desprez's real-life observations. The latter artist hand colored and signed select impressions that the two advertised as *dessins coloriés*, or "colored drawings," meant only for *hommes de goût*, or "men of taste."

John L. Severance Fund 2001.19

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Subterranean Jail for the Stage, 1788
Etching and aquatint

Abel Schlicht
(German, 1754–1826)

Trained as an architect, Abel Schlicht also designed stage sets for the Mannheim National Theater. An important forum for German cultural identity, the theater was one of the first companies to produce exclusively German-language plays, including those by beloved playwright Friedrich Schiller. Prisons were an especially popular drama subject in the 1700s, and sets would have featured in multiple productions. Here, Schlicht employed aquatint to render the gloomy space of one of his prison scenes. This technique enabled the artist to create the range of tones used to illuminate the background and plunge the foreground into darkness.

John L. Severance Fund 2003.23

Tomb with Sphinxes and an Owl, about 1779–84
Aquatint with etching

Louis Jean Desprez
(French, 1743–1804)

New excavations of Egyptian antiquities in Rome during the 1700s fascinated Enlightenment Europe and started a vogue for all things Egyptian. Scholars published new studies, artists appropriated motifs, and connoisseurs sought out objects for their collections. Here, French artist Louis Jean Desprez indulged in this popular trend, creating a fanciful design for a tomb that combines Egyptianized decoration with his observations of Italian catacombs. Conjuring the sense of awe and mystery that this ancient civilization held for many European people, Desprez stressed the monumentality and age of the stone and inscribed the tomb with invented hieroglyphs.

Imagined Landscapes

Landscape provided fertile ground for Enlightenment artists to creatively explore their ideas. They envisioned distant shores and cultures, conjured ancient tales or dreamlike paradises, and brought the wonders of nature to life. Artists played with printmaking techniques or employed unique compositional devices to produce images that revolutionized fashion, illustrated scientific texts, or shaped the way European people understood the world.

While some landscapes on view are clearly imagined, others appear wholly real. All blur the boundaries between truth and fantasy by mixing observed details with artistic invention. When revealed, the fictional elements expose the subjective values and assumptions masquerading behind Enlightenment narratives of objectivity.

(Plate 6 of 20) from *Grotteschi*, about 1747-48
Etching with engraving and drypoint
Giovanni Battista Piranesi
(Italian, 1720-1778)

The Tomb of Nero, from *Grotteschi*, about 1747–48
Etching with engraving and drypoint

Giovanni Battista Piranesi
(Italian, 1720–1778)

An ancient tomb, teeming with slithering snakes and overgrown vegetation, conjures the ruins of a strange and distant past in this print. The more lightly etched background appears faint against the jumble of darker lines in the foreground, as if the whole scene is slowly fading into the mist of time. Although the composition might seem to be one of pure imagination, the tomb it depicts was based on a real monument the artist had observed near Rome. Fascinated by classical antiquity, Giovanni Battista Piranesi evoked his own experience of seeing ruins, which he felt could not be conveyed by a more realistic portrayal.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles G. Prasse Collection 1974.255

Large Flowering Sensitive Plant, from *The Temple of Flora*, 1799
Etching with printed and hand-applied color aquatint, stipple, and engraving

Joseph Constantine Stadler
(German, active 1780–1822)
After Philip Reinagle
(British, 1749–1833)

The American Cowslip, from *The Temple of Flora*, 1807
Etching with printed and hand-applied color aquatint, stipple, and engraving

Thomas Warner
(British, active 1790–1823)
After Peter Charles Henderson

Fueled by scientific and colonial expeditions that brought back plant specimens from around the globe, the science of botany blossomed in Enlightenment Europe. These two prints are from a sumptuously illustrated treatise known as *The Temple of Flora*. Commissioned and published by Dr. Robert John Thornton, a British medical botanist, the works illustrate the new plant classification system of Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus. Yet while these prints realistically depict buds, flowers, and leaves, they show them in environments where they did not actually grow. Instead, Thornton had the artists situate specimens in imagined landscapes, often reminiscent of British colonial holdings, which he felt better suited the plants.

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Joseph Constantine Stadler
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After **Philip Reinagle**
(British, 1749–1833)

The American Cowslip, from *The Temple of Flora*, 1801
Etching with printed and hand-applied color, aquatint, stipple, and engraving

Thomas Warner
(British, active 1790–1828)
After **Peter Charles Henderson**
(British, active 1799–1829)

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Gift of the Print Club of Cleveland in honor of Mrs. William G. Mather 1955.479
Gift of the Print Club of Cleveland in memory of Mrs. Ralph King 1952.213

***Youth Playing a Lyre to a Maiden by a Fountain*, 1803**
Etching

Carl Wilhelm Kolbe the Elder
(German, 1759–1835)

Lush vegetation fills a peaceful scene of young lovers in this print, enclosing them in a private reverie. Framing the interaction and providing a haven for the couple, the overgrown plants also flourish, taking on a life of their own and consuming much of the composition. Their large size and intricate detail signal Carl Wilhelm Kolbe the Elder's fascination with plants, which he studied carefully on regular walks in the German countryside. The artist's meticulous observation of his local flora is visible in the insect holes dotting their leaves, an element that also serves to suggest mortality and the inevitable passage of time in this dreamlike image.

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Gift of Virginia Barbato 2019.243

The Four Continents, 1790
Copperplate-printed cotton

Firm of Christophe Philippe Oberkampf
(French, 1738–1815)
Designed by **Jean-Baptiste Huet I**
(French, 1745–1811)

Inspired by printed cottons from India, European manufacturers began printing textiles from copper plates in the 1750s. Originating in Ireland, the technique quickly spread to France, where it flourished. Here, Jean-Baptiste Marie Huet I depicts female personifications of the four continents alongside their native flora and fauna. Although the artist based the plants and animals on real specimens observed at the Royal Botanical Gardens, he derived the personifications from racial stereotypes that imagined Europe as culturally superior, while Europe sits enthroned with symbols of the arts and knowledge at her feet, Africa wears an elephant headdress, America hunts an alligator, and Asia prays to a false god.

Gift of Lenox Terrence Humphreys, 1929.6

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Gift of Gregor Norman Humphreys 1929.6

Optics and Illusions

During the Enlightenment period, vision was inextricably linked to truth and knowledge, leading to the creation of a culture fascinated by the science of sight. New emphasis was placed on optical science and on learning about the world through direct observation. Imagination was also thought to originate in vision. It allowed people to hold images in their minds and to generate new insights, inventions, and ways of understanding the world. Artists and inventors applied optics and imagination to their work, resulting in the development of new techniques to convincingly reproduce drawings and prints in color, thus creating objects that mimicked reality or sometimes even tricked the eye.